

U.S. Nuclear Arms — Backbone of NATO

By Josef Joffe

WASHINGTON — Are American critics of Western strategy sufficiently sensitive to the real worries of their European allies when it comes to matters nuclear? Until recently, "nuke-bashing" was mainly the preserve of peace marchers and bishops. Regrettably, it is now turning into a cottage industry among even well-meaning and well-informed Americans who should know better.

Last year, a quartet of former American officials known as the "Gang of Four" (Robert S. McNamara, Gerard C. Smith, George F. Kennan and McGeorge Bundy) produced a proposal for "no first use" of nuclear weapons — a suggestion that went squarely against time-hallowed North Atlantic Treaty Organization doctrine. Predictably, the proposal triggered severe anxiety among West European leaders who see their countries' security chained to America's resolve to launch nuclear weapons on behalf of its allies. *WA*

This year, at the opening of the political season, there is what might be called "No First Use — the Sequel," written by Mr. McNamara, former Secretary of Defense. European policymakers were just digging in for a "hot autumn" of antinuclear demonstrations intended to head off scheduled deployment of new intermediate-range missiles in Europe. Not surprisingly, they were shocked to hear that NATO should renounce its reliance on nuclear weapons, that these weapons were "totally useless" and "served no military purpose whatsoever." Europe can surely do without such friendly advice.

Critics of NATO's posture are admittedly right in warning that the thousands of short-range nuclear weapons deployed in Western Europe would devastate alliance territory there first and foremost. They jump to threadbare conclusions, however,

when they assert that therefore the threat to use them first "has lost all credibility as a deterrent to Soviet conventional aggression."

The critics' first mistake is in their calculation of the threat in Europe — which, alas, is not merely one of conventional aggression. The Russians seem altogether unfazed by battle-

field nuclear weapons. Their stockpiles in Eastern Europe are growing, and nuclear weapons — from the lowly artillery shell to the megaton-range strategic warhead — are seamlessly integrated into their war-fighting doctrine, in Europe as elsewhere.

Secondly, only nuclear weapons can deter nuclear weapons. To re-

nounce "first use" is tantamount to renouncing any use of nuclear weapons, thus undoing the deterrent effect they are supposed to maintain. Why? Because in preparing for war, the Russians would have to anticipate dealing with those nuclear weapons the alliance would hold in reserve for "second use." Yet Moscow can never know whether the alliance would stick to its pledge of no first use, especially if the tide began to turn against the Western armies. The Russians would therefore have every incentive to make that promise watertight by destroying NATO's last-resort weapons from the very beginning.

The critics' apocalyptic assumptions — that "we must get rid of the weapons before they get rid of us" — lead them to pose the wrong question. They ask whether we are really prepared to unleash Armageddon against ourselves — and then conclude that our nuclear threats have

Critics pose the wrong question

lost all credibility.

What they don't seem to grasp is that deterrence is something that concentrates our opponent's mind. Faced with an awesome array of Western nuclear weapons, the Russians cannot bank on our restraint or on a "cheap" conventional victory. As long as the weapons are in place, the Kremlin figures, they may just be used, triggering an incalculable chain of escalation. The price of conquest thus rises toward infinity. That is the essence of deterrence.

Adopting a policy of "no first use" would also have disastrous political effects within the alliance. Writing in the current issue of Foreign Affairs, Mr. McNamara confesses that he himself had urged Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson "never [to] initiate . . . the use of nuclear weapons." That revelation will surely come as a surprise in the capitals of NATO. To disclose that an American Secretary of Defense never believed what his Government had always pledged in public will hardly strengthen the weight of America's words in the future.

Washington's promise to come to the aid of its European allies, with nuclear weapons if need be, is the very backbone of the Atlantic alliance. If European leaders were ever convinced that the United States had no intention of making good on its nuclear pledge, it would be the beginning of the end of the most successful alliance in history. The antinuclear cure may be worse than the disease, for uncertain protection can only make for uncertain allies. *A 27*

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